

## **How much political power did women hold in the American Revolutionary era?**

Feminist historians place into the hands of contemporary women of the American Revolution a somewhat fabricated amount of power and influence. They seem to harbour a liberal reluctance to acknowledge the mostly subordinate position of women in the eighteenth century. However, they are not wrong to stress the importance of searching beyond the white male Founding Fathers that so often dominate historical literature. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville duly noted that ‘When the historian of aristocratic ages surveys the theatre of the world, he at once perceives a very small number of prominent actors who manage the whole piece’.<sup>1</sup> For their inquisitive nature, feminist historians of the American Revolution deserve much credit. Women were certainly involved in revolutionary politicization in the colonies; however the effectiveness of their protests, in the dissemination of patriotic beliefs in an essentially androcentric society, is questionable. The structuralist school of thought offers much to the historian in explaining the absence of considerable female political activity, showing that women did not contain any less political feeling than men, but were unable to express themselves in a suppressive age.

The political culture of the American colonies centripetally followed the male population, thus female revolutionary participation could have no, or very little, influence on legislative decisions. Of the fifty six signatures inscribed on the Declaration of Independence, not a single one was written by a female hand. Until 1872 no American woman had voted in a presidential election and the first, Susan Anthony, was subsequently arrested and fined \$100. Robert Calhoun explains that during the revolutionary years ‘society was...divided among the rulers and the ruled, and the rulers [...] were not the tools of the people but their

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<sup>1</sup> de Tocqueville, p. 90.

political superiors'.<sup>2</sup> The deferential nature of colonial politics meant that politically women (and blacks) were viewed as the 'citizenry', and 'instinctively acknowledged the superior political ability of an educated and wealthy social elite'.<sup>3</sup> Although female political groups, such as the Association, were formed, the intellectual and political elite ultimately had their foot firmly placed on their actions. In 1780, after receiving substantial sums of donations to aid the Revolution, the Association planned to offer the collected money to 'the Soldiery'. However, George Washington was trenchant not to give money but clothes to the troops. As a result, 2,200 'shirts were distributed among the most needy soldiers in the Continental line'. Although Washington formally thanked the 'powerful as they are amiable' women, he had exercised his authority as one of the revolutionary elite, withdrawing all power from the Association and setting the women to work with needle and thread.<sup>4</sup> The act of charity no doubt meant great amounts of thanks sounded along the Continental line. However Washington's actions portrayed a very direct message: men were content so long as women protested the Crown from their sewing machines, where they could not intervene in politics. Even as late as 1780, four years after the Declaration of Independence had explicitly stated 'that all men are created equal',<sup>5</sup> it was clear that 'government was in the hands of the oligarchs';<sup>6</sup> of whom none were women.

Society simply was not sufficiently evolved, politically or socially, to permit female involvement in politics. For this reason, structuralism has much to offer the historian on the role of women in America during the revolutionary years. The organized principles of the revolutionary elite reigned over the female population. Women were not only excluded from politics, but they were not expected to have political opinions because of their social standing. Henry Home Lord Kames attempted, in 1778, to explain the absence of female

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<sup>2</sup> Calhoun, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Calhoun, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> De Pauw, pp. 170-3.

<sup>5</sup> *Declaration of Independence* (US: 1776) "Men" here is universal.

<sup>6</sup> Brogan, p. 146.

political influence. In his widely circulated *Sketches of the History of Man* he wrote that women felt ‘less patriotism than men’ and therefore ‘Cultivation of the female mind is not of great importance in a republic’.<sup>7</sup> A twenty-first-century reader can only look on these words as a libel. Women were not any less capable than men in obtaining political fervour, but were discouraged by an unevolved and backward society. Linda Kerber explains that women ‘experienced politics through husbands, fathers, and sons’<sup>8</sup> and were often ‘boxed in by the political choices made by their male relatives’. The American objection to virtual representation in Parliament in turn outlined its own internal iniquities. How could the social and political elite fight for democracy when it was not enforced within their own borders? Political projection flowed through the veins of the colonial society, resulting in the restriction of female political vehemence. For this reason, women were unable to hold sufficient political power in Revolutionary America.

‘Society did not permit women [...] the sense of voluntary civic duty’,<sup>9</sup> but despite being ‘boxed in’ by their male relatives, women still attempted anti-British protests from inside their own homes.<sup>10</sup> Linda Grant De Pauw stresses the role of women in the politicization of the household. She states that ‘spinning and weaving their own cloth was a form of economic warfare’ and ‘women clearly viewed their spinning wheels as weapons’.<sup>11</sup> In 1775, Patriot Abigail Foote recollected in her diary that she ‘carded two pounds of whole wool and felt Nationaly’.<sup>12</sup> Their efforts received some praise in the colonies; Ezra Stiles congratulated the ‘92 Daughters of Liberty, who spun and realed til 170 sheins were done’.<sup>13</sup> But the overall effectiveness of their protests has to be brought into question. It has been

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<sup>7</sup> Lord Kames, pp. 85, 97

<sup>8</sup> Kerber, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> Carp, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Kerber, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> De Pauw, p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> De Pauw, p. 155.

<sup>13</sup> Kerber, p. 58.

estimated that in 1775 the colonies were inhabited by 2,803,000 people.<sup>14</sup> Given roughly half of these people were women, the 92 Daughters of Liberty do not reflect a vast amount of the population but only a handful of radicals. Kerber suggests that much of the remaining 99.994% of colonial women ‘were excessive in their consumption of British goods’ and ‘were undercutting the effects of American men to develop a fully independent national culture’.<sup>15</sup>

We can derive further evidence for the weakness of colonial female political groups when looking at the tea consumption boycott, which became ‘uniquely a woman’s cause’, to quote De Pauw.<sup>16</sup> The colonists found themselves livid after the Tea Act was passed by parliament in 1773. But in North Carolina, just 51 women publically vowed to abstain from the consumption of tea at the Edenton Tea Party of 1774. These women accounted for roughly 0.05% of the female habitants of North Carolina; a heavy statistic of which De Pauw’s argument cannot bear the weight.<sup>17</sup> There is no doubt that anti tea rallies, such as the Boston Tea Party, brought with them great political fervour. They converted many neutrals and Loyalists and severely harmed British trade. However Trevor Lloyd proposes that the slump in trade did not occur out of female protest, but that tea ‘sat unsold because the high British tariff meant that it could not meet the competition from smugglers’<sup>18</sup>. Ian Christie concurs by stating ‘colonial merchants combined to impose a virtual boycott of British trade’.<sup>19</sup> But the total value of imports from England by the American colonies tells a different story. Total imports actually rose, from £1,339,840 in 1771 to £1,920,950 by 1775.<sup>20</sup> These figures show that neither male nor female protests affected importation interests and Anglo-American trade increased even after the Tea Act was passed. It is important to note

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<sup>14</sup>United States Census Office, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Kerber, p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> De Pauw, p. 156.

<sup>17</sup> Based on the United States Census Office’s estimate that there were 181,000 people in NC in 1775, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Lloyd, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Christie, p. 91.

<sup>20</sup> US Department of Commerce, p. 1176.

that men ran the colonial ports, and these men simply ignored the efforts of the Sons and Daughters of Liberty to boycott trade with Britain. Colonial women mostly protested from their sewing machines, or did not participate in politics, as the above figures have shown.

Clear indications of an apolitical feminine culture provide firm reasoning leading to the suggestion that women did not harbour any kind of political power. But it would be unfair to blame this on the women themselves. Many men, such as Benjamin Franklin, James Otis and John Dickinson, found success in the publishing industry either as a publisher or a writer. Perhaps if women also looked towards this means of protest, they might have found more success. As the poem states, newspapers and pamphlets were ‘the general source throughout the nation/ Of every modern conversation’.<sup>21</sup> But women were not able to take advantage of these ‘spring[s] of knowledge’.<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Mays indicates that ‘between 30 and 45 percent of American women were able to sign their names in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’.<sup>23</sup> Abigail Adams reminded the colonists ‘how much female education is neglected [and] how fashionable it has been to ridicule female learning’.<sup>24</sup> Most women were not required to write in colonial America; therefore they lent their hands to the sewing machines, using spinning and reeling as the beacons of their protests. A mostly illiterate female population was averted from the most powerful means of political proselytisation, limiting women’s political power, simply because of their social standing.

There is no doubt that women attempted to assert some kind of political influence through protests in the American colonies during the revolutionary years. Organised groups such as the Association and the Daughters of Liberty forgathered greater amounts of support towards suffrage. However, during the 1770s these organisations were simply not powerful enough to administer any great steps towards American independence. Their efforts were

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<sup>21</sup> Carp, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Bell, p. 223.

<sup>23</sup> Mays, p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> De Pauw, p. 155.

often regulated by the intellectual and political elite, such as George Washington. Their endeavours often gained support; indeed, Christopher Gadsen, later the South Carolina delegate at the Stamp Act Congress, noted in 1769 ‘tis impossible to succeed without the support of women’.<sup>25</sup> However, females were restricted to their homes, and omitted from a front seat on the political scene in a society that was simply not ready to give women a voice. Their respective educations prevented their involvement in powerful and influential sectors of Revolutionary protest, such as the publishing industry. Women did not proselytise a great number of neutrals and Loyalists, however, neither did men. John Adams wrote that after America gained its independence, a staggering ‘full one third were averse to the Revolution’.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the role of women in the politicization of Americans is overshadowed by the brutal and outlandish tactics of males during the Revolutionary years. Governor Tyrone described the Congresses and minutemen as ‘a species of tyranny and despotism scarcely to be equalled in History’.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps if women had also employed this persona, they may have enjoyed greater conversion rates. However, not for want of trying, they did not.

In contrast to Kames’ views, the authenticity of female political views is not to be brought into question, but only their effectiveness, as a whole, to influence colonial politics. They were simply not able to orchestrate constructive protests because of a prejudiced and androcentric society. Eighteenth-century American men ran politics, armies and colonial ports leaving little for women to do but ‘seeketh wool and flax and worketh willingly with her hands’.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Kerber, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, p. 233.

<sup>27</sup> Halstead Van Tyne, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> Kerber, p. 59.

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